



A review of
**A Portable
Shelter**

Katherine Langrish

Set in today's Scotland, with characters who work long shifts on the rigs, entertain in holiday camps or run tourist boats on Loch Ness, this lively, lovely book of linked short stories is imbued with otherworld magic. References to folklore and fairy tales glint through the fabric like gossamer threads in homespun cloth. 'You know something, my Coorie?' whispers Ruth to the baby growing inside her, 'Every story ever told is a promise: stick with me and I'll tell you some truths. Clear directions, relatable characters: a breadcrumb trail, each part linking from the one before to the one after. And I want your life to be like that for you. I want your life to make sense. If I had three wishes, I'd wish them all on that.' But of course, people with three wishes seldom use them wisely.

The 'portable shelter' of the title is Ruth's body: 'I brought you here to this little house at the top of the world because – well, because you are inside me, so everywhere I go, you must go too. ... You are sheltered inside me, but your mothers need somewhere to live too. Somewhere safe and steady as the beat of a heart.'

Cosied down in the safety of home, awaiting the birth of their first child, Ruth and Liska have made a pact with each other never to tell their baby anything but the truth. Yet before they know it, they are secretly whispering stories of werewolves, dragons, selkies and witches. How can these 'lies' be justified? Eventually they conclude, 'There's no other way to give you the truth except to hide it in a story and let you find your own way inside.' Perhaps ultimately it is the stories we tell that offer us shelter?

In 'Ex-' ('a story that isn't a story, because it's true') an angry, unhappy young man tells the story of his life while insisting there is no story. 'We make stories to account for everything that happened. ... But sometimes things just happen.' His sister died before he could meet her, so he isn't a brother. He wasn't a victim of sexual abuse as a child, because he 'made it happen'. He didn't run away with his dad because his dad changed his mind. He wasn't Eden's boyfriend because 'she never said I was'. He didn't become a father because she didn't tell him she was pregnant. He didn't go with her for her abortion because 'she didn't need me to go'. In denying narrative in his life, he denies

causality, misses out on every relationship and defines himself by what he's not. The only thing he claims responsibility for is his abuse.

'The Keep', a twist on 'Bluebeard', is told in the collective voices of murdered girls. A woman lives with her lover in a caravan – another 'portable shelter' – precariously balanced over a stream. 'He'd . . . magicked it into a labyrinth for girls, a make-believe home the size of eight coffins lashed together.' But the sly, sad ghosts who haunt the caravan leave signs and clues for her to read: 'a silken negligee delicate as mothwings, a pair of stockings twisted garrotte-thin'.

'A Perfect Wife' takes the image of sexual temptress, siren or mermaid, and reverses it. Liska's sister Mirren loves her husband 'the way a woman should . . . completely, blindly, consumingly'. She identifies so completely as his wife that when he's away on the rigs she loses any ability to function independently. Like Hans Andersen's Little Mermaid, Mirren is an obsessive, disabled by love, unable to explain what is happening to her:

She tried to tell him. Or she thought about telling him. Or she just opened her mouth and closed it again. She knew the pressure of words on her ears, and she knew that she hadn't spoken aloud. (51)

The only words she is physically able to utter are: 'I love you'. When she tries to follow her husband into the sea and nearly drowns, a neighbour rescues her. She speaks her three fatal words to him and he takes advantage of her depression. When her husband finds out and leaves her, she walks into the sea, 'the love scooped out of her':

She was beautifully empty. She did not need someone to fill her up. She breathed, and her lungs filled like pink wings. Her bones felt hollow as a seabird's. Her heart was light and huge, the hugest thing she could imagine. It swelled, and her chest seemed to expand, each rib spreading like the fingers of an unfurling fist. The wind blew through her and under her, lifting her higher. (59)

Like the Little Mermaid who becomes a spirit of the air, renouncing the world, this may be an improvement on her previous state, but is hardly a happy ending.

In other stories: a young man remembers his wonderful sixth birthday, when lots of exotic animals turned up and brought him presents. Did he really see them, or did his unreliable Uncle Eli make it all up? A shy crab fisherman gets up the nerve to take the man he's in love with out on the boat and reveal his true, selkie self. A changeling tale explores what happens when someone you love leaves, when you can't understand or explain it, when everything you try fails. A woman who's lost her children looks for a

gingerbread cottage in the woods because even though sometimes the children never come back, you have to go through the stories to find an ending.

Kirsty Logan has a vivid gift for language and writes with a poet's exactness of expression. A man loves a woman so much that he would 'drink the water left in her footprints'. In a happy household, 'love pulsed through our home like blood through a good, strong heart.' In possibly my favourite story, 'Cold Enough to Start Fires', a boy on an unhappy family holiday escapes his bullying brothers and abusive father, and meets a dragon which speaks to him 'in a voice sharp as smashing dishes'. The note of domestic violence is perfect. Yet, in 'The Exact Sound of Grief', Logan recognises the limits beyond which words cannot reach.

The hardcover book is itself a lovely production, enhanced with evocative black-and-white illustrations by Liz Myhill. Often funny, frequently touching, beautifully written, *A Portable Shelter* is a witty and poignant meditation on relationships, on the human longing for emotional and physical security, on the difficulty of telling the truth in a complicated world, and on stories themselves.

Author: Kirsty Logan.

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